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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses three issues facing institutions that produce distance instruction. The first section covers the retraining of students; the new cohort of distance students must be trained to be comfortable with technology, with mediated interaction, and with the new paradigm of student-centered learning. The retraining of faculty is addressed in the second section; faculty must be comfortable with student-centered learning and taught to redesign the syllabus, use the technologies being employed, and integrate interaction into the course content. The last section discusses redesign of the course content, including rethinking the content, viewing the learners in a new light, and including opportunities for interaction, group work, and dialogue. The instructor's evolving role during the course of the class is also discussed. (DLS)

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A Distance Education How-To Manual: Recommendations from the Field

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Abstract: Distance education has opened the doors of education to literally thousands of students who could not otherwise receive instruction. Although the electronic highway is readily available to deliver the information, the issues of transition from traditional to distant instruction remain to be solved. The initiation of distance education must include the transition from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction, support of faculty, and the knowledge of how to restructure the coursework to meet the needs of the new world-cohort of learners.

Introduction

Distance education has opened the doors of education to literally thousands of students who could not otherwise receive instruction. While the advent of distance delivery has been important for students, the institutions producing the instruction have grappled with numerous issues for the purpose of providing high-quality education. This paper will look at three of these issues from the viewpoint of a distance educator.

The Retraining of Students

Since the advent of the Common School, students have come to accept the Socratic model wherein passive receipt of instruction, limited discussion and regurgitation of facts on examinations are commonplace. Distance education is substituting this timeworn paradigm with one that places far more responsibility on the learner. Students are now being asked to examine thinking and learning processes; collect, record, and analyze data; formulate and test hypothesis; reflect on previous understandings; and construct their own meaning (Crotty, 1994). The once teacher-centered instruction has now become student-centered and as a result, the once passive learner must now be engaged actively in creating personal knowledge that can be transitioned to new and different situations.

Although the paradigm has changed, students still arrive at the educational marketplace with the old expectations in place. Changing old ideas becomes the responsibility of the distant educator. This new cohort of students will require careful retraining if they are to comprehend the student-centered provisions of distance education. Not only will their focus become personally determined, but the depth of their learning and the degree of interaction will be seriously modified. The former teacher-centered model required little if any interaction from students. While the need to interact with others is an innate tendency that most students possess when they begin their education, the introduction of technology, which mediates interaction, often hinders that tendency. Therefore, it is essential that the retraining of students include brief technological instruction, coupled with periodic question and answer sessions to assure that the interaction will persevere and will include both pedagogical and social attributes.

Today's modern technology allows for interactivity between student and instructor to transpire in many formats. Teleconferencing, interactive video, conference calls, and CUSeeMe are only a few of the possibilities. It is important, therefore, for the interactivity to move beyond brief encounters between

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student and teacher and to invoke a feeling of cohesion between student and teacher, among the students themselves, and finally between the student and the material being studied. In the traditional setting of education, students interact easily and often to discuss course material as well as social topics. The same "chat" is important in the distance setting and must be carefully and richly sculptured by the instructor. Students who are unaccustomed to using a microphone to speak or the lack of visual contact with the person to whom the question is being addressed need to be instructed on how to utilize the technology to interact.

In addition to the social and pedagogical "chat" that is so important in successful distance education, is the student's ability to think critically about the topic being taught. McGiven (1994) believes success in distance education is directly related to the student's ability to critically analyze, to interpret information and to interact with peers to elaborate on the concept. Many students are unable to interact successfully until they have a basic understanding of how to analyze a question and how to synthesize the information being discussed. The advancement from lower level thinking skills to higher order skills is a most important issue that must be addressed during the retraining of students.

The changing needs of students suggest that distance education has the opportunity to foster a student-centered learning process and the responsibility to retrain students within the new model of instruction. This opportunity can be realized only when the new cohort of distance students is comfortable with the technology, with mediated interaction, and with the new paradigm of student-centered learning.

The Retraining of Faculty

Although advances in technology have allowed unique opportunities for the delivery of student-centered instruction to geographically diverse populations, the aggregate effectiveness of distance education ultimately rests with the faculty's endorsement of the new student-centered model of instruction. Most professors come to distance education with traditional teaching experience and find that the theoretical-based assumptions that worked successfully in face-to-face instruction do not translate well into technologically mediated instruction (Schieman, Taire & McLaren, 1992). As a result, faculty retraining is essential not only to assist with the use of the technology, but to also help with the revision of the instructional design.

The retraining should initially focus on moving the teacher from the podium to the sideline, from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction. Once this objective is achieved, subsequent retraining components can encompass items such as the redesign of the syllabus, use of the technologies being employed and the integration of interaction in the course content. Reaching a comfort level for most faculty requires hours of rehearsal, trial and error, and planning. This is not a result of the difficulty with the technology itself, but instead a result of the mediated delivery. Lack of personal response and body language makes teaching at a distance a new experience. Additionally, the role of facilitator is unfamiliar to most faculty. Role playing and conceptualization of questions that require higher order thinking skills necessitate considerable time on the part of the distant educator.

Although often overlooked, the scheduling of the retraining is important as well. Orientation and training sessions should be scheduled well in advance of the beginning of the semester. Only then can faculty be expected to integrate the theories of the new paradigm with quality course content and, therefore, meet the challenges of distance education.

Redesign of the Course Content

The sentiment of many faculty entering the distance education arena for the first time is to teach the same course offered on campus with the addition of a few more handouts. To those who are experienced in the art of distance delivery, it is evident that the addition of a few more handouts is not the solution for successful course design. Recent work by McGiven (1994) found that the most important component in successful distant instruction was that of required and consistent interaction. Although much has been written about the need for interaction (Garrison, 1990; McGiven, 1994; Wagner, 1993) few researchers have offered specific ideas for integrating dialogue into distance education. Experience of the writer has

indicated that the course design should focus on real world problems, students working in teams to find solutions, and consistent dialogue between class members and the instructor. Additionally, the questions posed should involve higher-order thinking skills such as evaluation, analysis, and synthesis rather than rote memorization. Once the question is' presented, either by the instructor or the students, hypothesizes should be discussed and finally teams of students should be assigned to explore possible solutions. In the early weeks of the course, forced interaction is usually required. This can take place by linking a portion of the final grade to the length and occurrence of interaction. In traditional instruction, this portion of the grade is usually referred to as attendance.)

After several weeks of successful interaction, the role of the instructor can shift to that of moderator. During this second phase, the instructor's input should constitute of no more than 20 percent of the total dialogue and should primarily involve setting the pace of the discussion as well as acting as the "provocateur". A well designed distance education course includes many topics for discussion, feedback from students as well as experts, and finally links to other sources of pertinent information. URL locations, literature citations and journal articles are only a few of the possibilities. Although most new distance instructors are primarily focused on dialogue and interaction within the confines of the course content, it is important to incorporate a degree of humor into the course. Humor can lighten the burden of the learning curve and generate a feeling of sincerity among those in the class.

Redesigning a course for distance delivery requires not only a rethinking of the content but also a new view of the learners. Opportunities for interaction, students working in distant groups, and dialogue constitute the major changes in course design. The syllabus must become the road map and the student become the driver when instruction is mediated by technology.

Summary

Distance education is made up of a network of learners and teachers who travel electronic highways and meet in virtual universities. This offers both a challenge and an opportunity. The opportunity lies in the access to education for a world-wide coalition of students. The challenge lies in the successful retraining of students, the support of faculty, and finally in the selection of subject matter and technologies that lend themselves to high levels of interaction and dialogue. Both the challenge and the opportunity serve to make distance education unique.

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